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ABSTRACT

This digest examines issues related to the grading of students' classroom writing, including the relation of the writing process to the grading process, ways to construct effective writing assignments, fairness and professional judgment, ways to include students in the assessment of writing, and guidelines that professors can use to provide effective feedback to help students revise their writing. The paper discusses integrating grading into the writing process; constructing effective writing assignments; ensuring that professional judgments are fair; involving students in the grading process; and helping students learn how to respond effectively to writing. The paper also considers the type of administrative support needed by faculty to enable them to effectively intertwine the writing/grading process. (CH)

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Grading Students' Classroom Writing: Issues and Strategies

Bruce Speck

"How can I grade students' writing?" is a perennial question professors ask, regardless of their discipline. While a great deal of literature about grading classroom writing is available to professors (Speck, 1998a), that literature is scattered throughout a variety of sources. The purpose of Grading Students' Classroom Writing: Issues and Strategies is to synthesize major issues in the literature to make it accessible to professors throughout the disciplines. Thus, Grading Students' Classroom Writing discusses the relation of the writing process to the grading process, ways to construct effective writing assignments, theoretical issues in grading related to fairness and professional judgment, ways to include students in the assessment of writing, and guidelines professors can use to provide effective feedback for students to revise their writing. It does not focus on discipline-specific criteria for grading students' writing, because each discipline has its own norms and conventions. Professors need to communicate these norms and conventions to students to effectively and fairly grade students' writing.

Why Is It Important to Integrate Grading Into the Writing Process?

The writing process is recursive and includes various stages of revision. In integrating grading into the writing process, professors must consider the relationship between the grading process and a grade. The grading process results in a grade, the final evaluation professors give either to an individual assignment or to a series of assignments that included grades for individual writing assignments within the series. The grade is one part of the grading process, not the focus of the process. Indeed, the grading process extends from the development of a writing assignment to the administration of a final grade. When the grade is abstracted from the grading process, students may be left wondering how a grade was derived, professors may be put in the awkward position of explaining and defending a grade after the fact, and evaluation may be severed from the process of writing.

Nevertheless, integrating grading and the writing process is not without difficulties, including tension between the professor's roles as mentor and judge. The dual roles of mentor and judge raise ethical issues about the grading process and the grade and, in some quarters, undercut the writing process in favor of the grade. Such undercutting is unfortunate because the writing process can help students learn not only how to approach a writing task effectively but also how to evaluate their own and their peers' writing.

Why Do Professors Need to Construct Effective Writing Assignments?

Because the writing assignment specifies what students are expected to do and how students' written products will be evaluated, the writing assignment should include necessary information about audience and purpose, the two pillars of writing. The writing assignment also is the appropriate occasion for discussing discipline-specific norms and conventions for writing. Writing assignments, like most written products, should go through a process that includes peer review, so professors can enlist colleagues and students to critique writing assignments before the assignments are formally introduced.

How Can Professors Ensure That Their Professional Judgments Are Fair?

Although answers to the question of fairness are often discussed in terms of reliability and validity, the application of statistical requirements for reliability and validity are probably impractical in grading classroom writing. Grading methods that include the use of a rubric or some other tangible expression of grading criteria can promote greater fairness in grading, however (Anderson & Speck, 1998). Nevertheless, fairness in classroom assessment is complicated by a variety of issues (Allison, Bryant, & Hourigan, 1997; White, Lutz, & Kamusikiri, 1996; Zak & Weaver, 1998). In fact, fairness is inextricably linked with

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professional judgment, because the professor is the grading authority in the classroom. Thus, professors need to be sensitive to their responsibility for fairness when they grade students' papers.

How Can Professors Use Their Authority to Promote Students' Learning?

A powerful way to promote students' learning is to involve them in the grading process. To do so, professors should consider training students to function effectively as peer reviewers, modeling for them the integration of formal, subject matter, and teaching authority into the grading process so that students have examples of professional evaluators they can emulate when they serve as peer reviewers. When students are given the opportunity to function as professionals in the classroom, they can learn how to make informed decisions about writing quality, a task many students will be required to do in their vocations in nonacademic settings. Students' involvement also includes self-assessments.

How Can the Professor Help Students to Learn How to Respond Effectively to Writing?

Providing effective feedback to students will help them learn to revise their writing. Unfortunately, the literature on professors' feedback to students' writing includes numerous examples of how not to provide feedback. Three common inappropriate responses are cryptic responses, negative responses, and too much response. These forms of response are predicated on views of grading that are not commensurate with the writing process, primarily because they focus on errors. Fortunately, negative examples can serve a cautionary note, suggesting that professors need to learn how to provide effective feedback. Professors can take a step toward providing useful feedback by recognizing the perils they face when they read students' writing. When professors are sensitive to those perils, they can take a more cautious and more positive approach to reading and responding to students' writing. In particular, professors can provide written comments on students' writing by creating a dialogue when writing responses, pointing out writing, refraining from making unprofessional c successful omments, summarizing the gist of marginal comments at the end of a paper, giving students options for revising the paper, writing comments that model good writing, and deferring the assignment of a grade as long as possible. Positive, well written responses perfect the art of providing effective feedback to students and serve as models of desirable writing.

What Support Is Available to Help Professors Effectively Grade Students' Writing?

Effective grading of students' writing is hard work that requires a great deal of time and a commitment to reading the literature on grading classroom writing. Without administrative support, including appropriate class sizes and teaching loads, professors need to consider just how much time and energy they should devote to promoting the intertwining of the writing and grading processes. To the extent that professors do elect to use these intertwining processes, they might consider establishing a plan to integrate the processes in their classes over an extended period of time and to consult the literature on the grading of classroom writing for detailed information about effectively promoting the writing and grading processes.

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